



FACT SHEET

Module 11 Driving on Rural Gravel and Dirt Roads

A washboard road surface is common on gravel and dirt roads. Washboard roads are created by the vibration of a vehicle in motion. Washboarding normally appears first at intersections, on the approach to and through sharp curves, and at business and driveway entrances. When vehicle tires lose a firm grip on the road and spin or skid just a little, a slight amount of gravel is displaced. As this is repeated a number of times, the gravel will align itself into the washboard pattern. A U.S. Forest Service study has shown that light vehicles with small wheels and light suspensions cause more washboarding than loaded trucks.

Driving habits can aggravate washboarding. Hard acceleration and hard braking are the biggest causes of washboard roads. Tires have less road surface to grip resulting in poor traction. The vehicle suspension must work hard to compensate for irregularities in the road surface. The end result is like driving on marbles. The only safe way to negotiate a washboard surface is to reduce your normal speed. It may require a maximum speed of only 5 mph to reduce the vibration of washboard roads and restore control of the vehicle.



Traction on gravel and dirt roads is less than concrete or asphalt roads, so when driving on dirt or gravel roads, drivers must slow down. Increased speeds on dirt and gravel roads results in longer stopping distances and increases the risk of skidding due to loss of traction control.

